

A troubling broken promise

The Toronto Star

April 26, 2017 Wednesday

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Section: EDITORIAL; Pg. A10

Length: 627 words

Body

The Trudeau government's decision to delay its promised regulations on methane emissions points yet again to a worrying gap between Ottawa's rhetoric on the environment and its willingness to act.

During a visit with Barack Obama in Washington last year, Justin Trudeau trumpeted his government's commitment to introduce new rules to curb methane emissions from oil and gas operations by 2020, a move the Star celebrated at the time.

Methane is a particularly powerful greenhouse gas, with 25 times the warming effects of carbon dioxide. And as the primary source of the gas is leaky equipment, the fixes are relatively simple and fall under Ottawa's direct responsibility. The new regulations were widely seen as a fairly easy win as the Trudeau government works toward its climate goals.

But last week, CBC News obtained an internal report that showed the government plans to delay the new regulations to 2023. Apparently, in light of the U.S. retreat on climate, including on the Obama Administration's own methane regulations, the oil and gas lobbies successfully argued that the planned controls would put Canadian companies at a competitive disadvantage. (Of course, industry representatives had vehemently opposed the regulations prior to Trump's inauguration as well.)

The Trudeau government maintains it will still meet its target of reducing methane emissions by 40 to 45 per cent by 2025, but the three-year delay on the regulations will allow industry to belch out an estimated 55 megatonnes more methane in the meantime. This, at a time when Environment Canada says Ottawa has already fallen well behind as it pursues its goal to cut emissions by 30 per cent from 2005 levels by 2030, the same target the Liberals decried as grossly inadequate in opposition.

The move also casts doubt on Trudeau's repeated claims that Donald Trump's dangerous climate denialism will not negatively influence Canada as it seeks to meet its commitments under the Paris Accord.

Clearly there are often good reasons to delay or compromise, but the retreat on methane seems to be part of a larger and troubling trend. Trudeau has changed the conversation on the environment and taken important steps, but there's reason to be skeptical that he's willing to make the really difficult trade-offs required of a prime minister serious about climate action.

The Trudeau government's promise to impose a floor price on carbon, and its agreement to move away from coal, in addition to the substantial moves made by most provinces in recent years to curb emissions, will very likely shift Canada's climate dial.

But the government has also approved several energy projects, from the Pacific Northwest liquefied natural gas plant to the Trans Mountain pipeline, which are expected to significantly increase greenhouse gas emissions in the coming years, neutralizing some of the promised gains of the national climate plan.

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There are no doubt compelling economic cases to be made for these decisions, but the government seems unwilling to confront the trade-offs involved. Trudeau insists these projects are consistent with our climate targets, but his government refuses to provide a comprehensive accounting or keep any kind of balance sheet. So how can we or he be sure?

Indeed, if Trudeau is truly serious about his Paris commitments, he ought to explain how it's possible to meet them without a fundamental shift in Ottawa's approach to resource development, especially since the experts say it's not.

Trudeau can't have it both ways. His outspoken support of climate action has been a welcome departure from the Harper government's shameful laggardness, but the prime minister can break only so many promises on the environment before he puts in jeopardy trust both at home and beyond.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Document-Type: COLUMN

Publication-Type: NEWSPAPER

Subject: GREENHOUSE GASES (99%); CLIMATE ACTION (90%); CLIMATE CHANGE REGULATION & POLICY (90%); EMISSIONS (90%); REPORTS, REVIEWS & SECTIONS (79%); AGREEMENTS (78%); DELAYS & POSTPONEMENTS (78%); GLOBAL WARMING (78%); LOBBYING (78%); OIL & GAS REGULATION & POLICY (78%); POLLUTION MONITORING, PREVENTION & REMEDIATION (78%); TRENDS (74%); PRIME MINISTERS (73%); BUSINESS OPERATIONS (71%); TRUMP'S FIRST 100 DAYS (66%); APPROVALS (60%); PRICES (60%); EDITORIALS & OPINIONS (59%)

Industry: METHANE (93%); EMISSIONS (90%); NATURAL GAS (90%); OIL & GAS INDUSTRY (90%); NATURAL GAS PRODUCTS (89%); GLOBAL WARMING (78%); OIL & GAS FACILITIES (78%); OIL & GAS REGULATION & POLICY (78%); UTILITIES INDUSTRY (78%); LIQUEFIED NATURAL GAS (76%)

Person: JUSTIN TRUDEAU (79%); BARACK OBAMA (72%); DONALD TRUMP (57%)

Geographic: OTTAWA, ON, CANADA (88%); NORTHWEST USA (79%); CANADA (94%)

Load-Date: April 26, 2017